DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 189 SO 015 812

AUTHOR Jones-Wilson, Faustine C.
TITLE A Traditional Model of Educational Excellence: Dunbar High School of Little Rock, Arkansas.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984). Excerpted from author's book, same title, Howard University Press, 1981.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Education; Black Students; *Educational Experience; Educational Quality; Educational Research; Followup Studies; High Schools; Models; *Outcomes of Education; Racial Segregation; *Success

ABSTRACT

An attitude survey of Dunbar High School alumni in Little Rock, Arkansas, a black public high school with a reputation for excellence, was conducted to ascertain opinions concerning the preparation for successful adulthood this school afforded its students. A total of 1,523 people who graduated from Dunbar between 1930-1955 were contacted. Of these, 402 (26 percent) responded to a 97-item questionnaire modeled after the Questa II survey developed by the Educational Testing Service Secondary School Research Program. In addition, seven teachers, three former principals, and a number of community citizens were interviewed. Comparisons were also made between respondents' level of educational attainment and that of their parents. Respondents felt that Dunbar strongly emphasized and realized its goals of helping students improve their socioeconomic status, preparing them for jobs, encouraging self-discovery, teaching knowledge and skills, preparing for college, developing leadership skills, and preparing for citizenship. A total of 84 percent of respondents felt their teachers were well prepared; 91 percent indicated a positive social atmosphere. Level of educational attainment of Dunbar graduates generally exceeded those of their parents. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED247189

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Faustine C. Jones-Wilson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A TRADITIONAL MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL OF LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Faustine C. Jones-Wilson
Howard University

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
History and Historiography Division
(New Orleans, LA, April 1984)

SP 015 812

A TRADITIONAL MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL OF LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS*

Faustine C. Jones-Wilson
Howard University

Scant attention has been paid by social science researchers to effective black public high schools. Positive views about black learners and schools are far outnumbered by negative views that exude "an attitude of hopelessness" regarding the effects that schools can have on the achievement of students who are black and/or poor. Most blacks have been educated in public schools in the United States. In the 1930s, 1940s, and up to about 1954 there were urban black high schools that established and maintained records of excellence. This case study is primarily an attitude survey of alumni of one of those high schools, Dunbar of Little Rock, Arkansas. The research sought to ascertain the opinions of the alumni about that school in terms of the preparation it afforded them in their youth, and the contributions they feel it made toward success, or lack of it, in their adult lives.

During the 25-year period, 1930-1955, Dunbar was the only black public high school in Little Rock, and it educated all of the black youths in that city who remained in school, an unselected population. High school diplomas were awarded to 3,461 of them, 377 students earned trade certificates, and 54 students were awarded both the high school diploma and the trade certificate. These figures exclude the participation of veterans returning to school following World War II, 1946-1951 school terms.

*This presentation is excerpted from my book of the same title, published by the Howard University Press in 1981.

To find out how well the school had served its students and to discover shortcomings in the Dunbar program, I mailed a 97-item questionnaire to the 1,532 alumni who could be located in 1974-75. Dunbar's graduates are widely dispersed throughout the United States. Four hundred two (26%) of the persons who were mailed questionnaires responded. The basis for the survey was a modification of the Questa II questionnaire of the Educational Testing Service's Secondary School Research Program. Ninety-six of the 97 items were forced choices. Freedom of expression was allowed only in item 93, which asked "What teacher or teachers influenced you most at Dunbar and in what ways? (Write in)." In addition, I interviewed seven teachers of long experience at Dunbar High School, three former principals of the school, and a number of community citizens who were very long-term residents of the city. Archival materials from the School Board's central office, from the public library, and from the Arkansas Historical Society were used for the historical information.

Certain limitations apply to this research effort: (1) no claim is made for representativeness; respondents are random; (2) the percentage is too small to make generalizations about all the graduates of Dunbar, so generalizations apply to the respondents only; (3) the odds are overwhelming that only people who considered themselves successful returned the questionnaires; (4) there is no fool-proof, scientific way to evaluate the reliability of the conclusions reached. However, in no instance did the survey data contradict interview or observational data.

Method

The questionnaires were coded, keypunched, and tabulated at the university's computer center. An item-by-item analysis was run, printing

frequency distributions and percentages, along with measures of central tendency and chi squares for each item. Then responses were grouped by year of graduation into 5-year intervals, 1930-34, 1935-39, 1940-44, 1945-49, 1950-55, in order to examine the differences, if any, among graduates of various time periods. Nine indices were constructed using the appropriate items in the questionnaire: (1) purposes and goals of the school, (2) school rules and regulations, (3) curriculum, (4) teacher attitudes and teaching practices, (5) communication or personal relationships between groups, (6) extracurricular and athletic programs, (7) satisfaction with the characteristics of the school and peoples' interaction with each other, (8) the effects of the school on students, (9) the relationship between parents' levels of education and that of the respondents. These items were shown to have high inter-item correlation in addition to their face value for the index.

A comparison was made between respondents' levels of educational attainment and those of their parents to assess the extent to which Dunbar graduates exceeded the educational level attained by their parents.

Using a modification of the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position, with education and occupation as the key variables, societal position was computed for these respondents. The objective was to estimate the positions these individuals occupy in the status structure of American society.

Findings

The alumni who responded to the 97-item questionnaire felt that Dunbar strongly emphasized and largely realized these goals:

helping students to improve their socioeconomic status, preparing them for jobs, encouraging self-discovery and personal fulfillment, teaching them specific knowledge and skills, preparing them for college, developing their independent thinking and leadership skills, nurturing their creativity, developing their social consciences, and preparing them for active citizenship. Persons who graduated between 1940 and 1944 felt most strongly about the realization of these school goals.

The vast majority of the 402 respondents (82%) had no complaints about school rules and regulations. Only 9 percent felt that the rules were too strict, and 8 percent felt that the rules were not enforced consistently.

Questions centered on the curriculum were aimed at determining if graduates thought Dunbar offered a good range and variety of courses, if the school developed students' abilities to analyze and criticize written and visual materials, and if most courses offered really useful knowledge or developed really useful skills. Approximately 86 percent of respondents agreed that Dunbar's course offerings fulfilled those three goals. Again, graduates from 1940-1944 were most emphatic in their responses. Remember that the Dunbar curriculum allowed students to earn high school diplomas, trade certificates, or both. Ninth-grade males attending Dunbar could choose courses in auto mechanics, bricklaying, plastering, or masonry in addition to the regular courses. A printing course was offered to 12th-graders. Girls could take tailoring, trade clothing, or food preparation. A commentary on that time -- all black females were required to take a class in laundry techniques, but white females in their schools took no such course.

Teacher attitudes and teaching practices are the heart of education, of course. Research has shown that teachers' attitudes toward their students tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. This is true regardless of race or social class. Eighty-four percent of the respondents said that many or most of their teachers had clearly outlined and organized their courses, covered a great deal of material, provided students with a broad understanding of the subject, made clear their expectations regarding assignments and tests, and tried to make sure that students understood class assignments. There was consensus that Dunbar teachers tried to make their classes interesting and meaningful, that they encouraged classroom discussion, that they were open with students, understood their problems, and encouraged youngsters to do as well as they possibly could.

Dunbar was not Utopia, however. A few respondents commented negatively about the characteristics or behaviors of a small number of teachers who showed lack of concern for students, who humiliated students, or who showed partiality for particular students. One teacher was castigated for using harsh physical punishment. Others were described as "dull," i.e., not interesting or enthusiastic.

With respect to communication, or personal relationships between groups, 91 percent of the graduates indicated that relations between student leaders and students, students and students, teachers and students, and parents and the school were positive.

The average number of extracurricular activities per student was three, while the range of such activities was from one to nine per student. No indication was given of the number of years of participation in each activity. Dunbar's coaches organized team sports,

and the school won football, basketball, and track championships. Facilities were inadequate -- the school had no gymnasium, for example, and had to use the stadium of the white high school for its athletic events. Only about 1/3 of the respondents felt that the extra-curricular program afforded sufficient quality and variety.

Satisfactory human relations are basic to the successful functioning of schools. To ascertain the quality of human interactions, six questions were asked. Ninety-six percent of the respondents agreed that Dunbar students generally had open and friendly relationships with one another, 93 percent felt that students exercised genuine leadership in areas that affected them, and 98 percent agreed that overall their experience at Dunbar was a good one.

Seventeen questionnaire items sought information from graduates about the effect of the school on their lives. These questions dealt principally with four areas: the role of the school in improving students' self-confidence and self-image, its role in improving their academic skills, its role in improving their ability to get along with others, and its role in influencing their interest in politics and the arts. Eighty-eight percent of graduates between 1940 and 1944 said that Dunbar had helped them a great deal in these areas; 71 percent of those who had graduated between 1930 and 1934 agreed. People who graduated between 1950 and 1955 were least positive about the influence of the school on their lives.

The level of education of the 402 Dunbar graduates who responded to the questionnaire far exceeded that of their parents. Twenty-three percent of the respondents had earned bachelor's degrees, 23 percent

had earned master's or equivalent degrees, and 8 percent held doctorates or the equivalent. Forty-one percent had attended college, but had not completed four years of college work. All of the respondents had earned high school diplomas, of course.

Their educational attainments contrast sharply with those of their parents. Thirty-nine percent of the fathers of these alumni and 30% of their mothers had completed eighth grade or less. Eighteen percent of the fathers and 22% of the mothers had attended high school but had not graduated. Thirteen percent of the fathers and 19% of the mothers were high school graduates. Twelve percent of the fathers and 11% of the mothers had some college education; 7% of the fathers and 8% of the mothers were college graduates. Of these, 4% of the fathers and 5% of the mothers had gone on for graduate or professional education. To paint the picture still more clearly, all of the Dunbar respondents were at least high school graduates, while 57% of the fathers and 52% of their mothers were not. These data suggest two things.

First, they suggest that parents of these Dunbar graduates encouraged their youngsters to graduate from high school, and many further helped their offspring obtain higher education. Perhaps more importantly the data suggest that the educational aspirations and attainments of black youth are not circumscribed by the educational attainments of their parents.

A publication describing Dunbar High School in the early 1950s reported that 60 percent of Dunbar's graduates went on to college. Since the student body was heterogeneous, this proportion of college-bound students was unusually large. We have no way of knowing how many

of these youngsters actually earned bachelors' degrees. But even if only half of them graduated, this would mean that 30 percent of Dunbar's graduates earned bachelors' degrees in the 1950s.

Let us compare this 30 percent -- admittedly a speculative figure -- with data from the U. S. Census Bureau. In 1960 -- when, in theory, Dunbar's last class of graduates (the class of 1955) would have completed a four-year college program -- only 4.1% of blacks nationwide had completed four years of college or more. Even among whites in 1960 only 11.9 percent of those between the ages of 25 and 34 had completed four years of college. Even if we jump to the year 1974 -- almost 20 years after Dunbar's last class graduates -- we find that only 8.1% of all blacks between the ages of 25 and 34 had completed four years of college or more, and 21% of whites had done so. Thus these figures make it seem safe to speculate that the proportion of Dunbar graduates who <u>completed</u> college was far greater than national norms for either blacks or whites through the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s.

Using a modification of the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position, with education and occupation as the key variables, to establish the social position of Dunbar graduates who took part in my survey. I found that in the status structure of U.S. society, 55% of these Dunbar graduates fell into the two highest social classes. Another 25% were in the middle (Class III). Only 16% were below average in class status. Remember that this was an unselected group of black youths attending a segregated school in a segregated society, and many of them were by definition economically poor.

Teacher and principal interviews indicated that strong administrative leadership, a climate of expectation where no children were permitted to fall below minimum achievement levels, orderliness and discipline with strong parental support, some "ability grouping" of students, frequent monitoring of pupil progress and evaluation of student effort, in-service development of teachers, all combined to account for successful academic results with Dunbar's students. They felt that physical facilities were too limited, career choices of students were too restricted, too much time was spent raising money and collecting fees for needs that the school district should have supplied. These were negative features about Dunbar High School as a learning environment.

Conclusions

In Little Rock, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School was part of a network of institutions that collectively gave black youth a "sense of moorings." The strong public school experience there was interwoven with a supportive family experience (often extended family), positive church participation, and cohesive community interest. The family and community supported school efforts, and the school uniquely served the black community.

This interaction of compelling forces took place within a system of institutionalized segregation, which had the effect of making visible to black youth the necessity of learning what was being taught in school, and the cost of failing to achieve there. A commonplace expression of the time was that a black person had to be "twice as

good" as a white person to receive half as much consideration in the marketplace for employment, upward mobility, recognition, esteem. The result of positive and negative forces was an ever-present sense of reality for most black youth that their chances for survival and progress were inextricably rooted in educational attainment

Dunbar ceased to function as a high school in May 1955. It became a junior high school, and still operates as such today, 1984. Alumni responses should not be attributed merely to nostalgia. There have been six national reunions of the classes -- Detroit (1973), Chicago (1975), Los Angeles (1977), Little Rock (1979), St. Louis (1981), Seattle (1983) -- that Dunbar's graduates have attended in large numbers at considerable expense of money and time to express appreciation to the school and its teachers, as well as to socialize with one another. There is a national alumni association with some twelve chapters scattered across the country, and with many "satellite" members who live in areas distant from most other graduates. In August 1980 the school was approved for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Numbered among Dunbar graduates are teachers, ministers, physicians, attorneys, judges, secretaries, corporate executives, federal employees, college professors, school administrators, college presidents, and other public officials. There are construction workers, contractors, caterers, barbers, and beauticians. These people contribute to the society. Their ability to contribute did not occur by chance. The education provided by Dunbar High School was a central factor that prepared these blacks to become qualified,

contributing adults. Since the graduates are widely dispersed, Dunbar contributed not only to Little Rock and the state of Arkansas, but to the many other states and cities where its graduates reside. The investment in education has paid off many times over -- for the alumni, their families, their communities, and the larger society.

This case study of Dunbar High School graduates makes clear that there is no societal advantage to be gained by restricting the aspirations and achievements of any group. Further, it is an unjust burden on the young to be placed in situations that force them to succeed "in spite of the system." Policy makers at all levels must be willing to formulate educational policies and practices that will enhance the learning opportunities and hence the capabilities of black children. Dunbar's graduates provide concrete evidence that high-quality education is good for participants and for the society.